Polycarp of Smyrna: Historical Enigma and Literary Legacies

Michelle C. Sdao

History Honors Thesis - AU 17

Polycarp of Smyrna is an historical enigma. Although he is a crucial link between Christians of the first century and those of the second, the extant documents surrounding Polycarp give only a few opaque insights into this historical figure. The problem is that scholarship on Polycarp has swelled so much in the last four centuries, that scholars no longer see Polycarp as the mystery which the evidence presents. Because of the paucity and obscurity of evidence, scholars have used texts that post-date Polycarp in order to flesh out his historical biography, without taking into account the possible legendary nature of the accounts, and without considering the possibility of multiple independent traditions concerning Polycarp. Researchers yearn so greatly to assign a date to Polycarp's martyrdom and to place him in the correct apostolic "line" that they make stronger claims than the evidence allows.

Kenneth Berding and D. Richard Stuckwisch demonstrate my point well. Both seek to settle the question of whether Polycarp was in a Johannine or Pauline line, and they both correctly agree that the evidence is not sufficient to determine to which of the two lines he belonged. Their methodology, however, is one-sided and circumstantial. Berding is overly concerned with placing Polycarp in the "apostolic tradition," a united front of apostolic teaching in the second century which many scholars would claim did not exist.[1] This raises the question of whether Polycarp himself may have actually been the first person to solidify the concept of "apostolic tradition" by citing supposedly apostolic sources. Stuckwisch, on the other hand, although correctly perceiving the potential issues with accepting Irenaeus's claim that Polycarp was a disciple of John the apostle, unsubstantially conjectures that Polycarp was prone to being accused of Marcionism because of his heavy citation of Paul, that John was prone to being accused of Gnosticism, and that Irenaeus nullifies these accusations by linking the two figures together. Polycarp cannot be a

[1] Kenneth Berding, "John or Paul? Who Was Polycarp's Mentor?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 58, No. 2 (2007), 135-143.

Marcionite if he is a follower of John, and John cannot be a Gnostic if he taught the orthodox Polycarp.[2] There is, however, no reason to believe that Polycarp's abundant citation of Paul would have led to accusations of Marcionism. This scholarship pretends to know more than is possible from the evidence in an attempt to flesh out Polycarp's biography.

A short article regarding the dating of Polycarp's martyrdom by W.H.C. Frend demonstrates that attempts to date the events of Polycarp's life and ministry are also fraught with unfounded reasoning and lack appropriate evidence. Frend supports the Eusebian dating of the his death to the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Polycarp's eighty-six years of service to Christ mentioned in the Martyrdom of Polycarp (MartPol) must then be rendered from his baptism as a teenager, for he must have been born close to 70 C.E. in order that he could have interacted with John the apostle as Irenaeus claims.[3] Many scholars, however, hold that Irenaeus was confused or had motives for attaching Polycarp to John.[4] One might ask, therefore, whether we should date the martyrdom itself based on the assumption that the author of the MartPol was aware of the link between Polycarp and John, a link that appears nowhere in the text and, further, one based on an assumption that Irenaeus is conveying an accurate account. Scholars should not attempt to flesh out evidence and force dates that are not there. It is time to evaluate the sources anew.

The texts surrounding Polycarp can be broken into two categories. Ignatius's *Letter to the Magnesians*, *Letter to the Ephesians*, *Letter to Polycarp*, and *Letter to Smyrna*, Polycarp's *Letter*

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[2] D. Richard Stuckwisch, "Saint Polycarp of Smyrna: Johannine or Pauline Figure?," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61 (1997), 113-125.
[3] W.H.C. Frend, "A Note on the Chronology of the Martyrdom of Polycarp and the Outbreak of Montanism," *Oikumene: studi paleocristiani pubblicati in onore del Concilio ecumenico vaticano II* (1964), 499-506.
[4] Helmut Koester, "Ephesos in Early Christian Literature," in *Ephesos Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Helmut Koester (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 138; Paul Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament: The Occasion, Rhetoric, Theme, and Unity of the Epistle to the Philippians and its Allusions to New Testament Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 38-41; R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 123-128.

to the Philippians, fragments of Papias, and Irenaeus's *Letter to Victor* are texts that potentially provide reliable information for the historical Polycarp.[5] I will refer to these as the "reliable sources." The remaining texts are historically unreliable for Polycarp's biography because they represent several independent, non-historical traditions that seek to construct Polycarp's legacy. These texts include the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* and *Letter to Florinus*, the Harris Fragments, and the *Vita Polycarpi.* I will refer to these works as "unreliable sources."[6] I will analyze the reliable and unreliable sources in order to demonstrate that the historical Polycarp differs from the legendary Polycarp. The unreliable texts represent two different, independent legendary traditions, namely a Johannine and a non-Johannine Polycarp, with different motives and functions of portraying Polycarp in their own way. While the legendary nature of the unreliable accounts and their function in using Polycarp to support the authors' own religious agendas indicate that they should not be used to flesh out Polycarp's historical biography, they do present significant functions, implications, and historical data for the communities in which they were written, which I will trace in this paper. Several significant conclusions can be drawn from this critical methodology: the historical link between Polycarp and John is false; scholars should cease from attempts to date Polycarp's martyrdom any more precisely than between 150 and 180; and there was at least one tradition among Christians that had no knowledge of a connection between Polycarp and John.

First, I wish to situate my thesis among several methodological and scholarly traditions. Scholars of early Christianity are accustomed to the idea of multiple independent or diverging

[5] Polycrates's *Letter to Victor* also belongs in this group, although I discuss it only briefly, without full analysis, because of its limited information regarding Polycarp.
[6] These labels of "reliable" and "unreliable" do not indicate that that the latter texts are "unhistorical," for they do give substantial historical information regarding the historical period and community in which they were written and regarding their authors.

traditions surrounding prominent figures in early Christianity. In *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon*, for example, Dennis MacDonald demonstrates that, while the *Acts of Paul* sought to maintain a view of Paul as a radical apocalypticist who supported female preaching, celibacy, and manumission, an image that conflicted with Roman familial and social values, the Pastoral Epistles opposed this view of Paul, constructing a competing tradition in which Paul supports episcopal marriage, female submissiveness, and a de-radicalized apocalypticism.[7] Likewise, by the second century, two different traditions regarding Simon Magus existed: "the heresiological, which regarded Simon as the founder of all heresies, and [the] tradition deriving from Acts, that he was a mere magician."[8] The portrait of Simon as the "founder of Gnosticism," most explicitly present in Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* and Hippolytus' *Refutation of All Heresies,* attempted to subvert Gnostic claims of apostolic tradition, while Simon the magician of the *Acts of Peter* builds on the account from Acts and allows Peter to demonstrate the superiority of "miracles" of God over pagan "magic."[9] There is little connection between the two traditions other than that Christians often used accusations of magic to dismiss "non-orthodox" Christians.[10] Finally, and most obviously, Christian authors variously portrayed Jesus as the Markan apocalyptic holy man, the Lukan prophet, the Thomasine philosophical sage, and so on. This example crucially demonstrates that Christian literature has been fraught from the beginning with diverging, independent, and competing traditions, all seeking to shape the legacy of their subjects. Why should we analyze Polycarp's literary legacy any differently?

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[7] Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1983).
[8] R. McL. Wilson, "Simon and Gnostic Origins," in *Gnosticism in the Early Church*, ed. David M. Scholer (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 115.
[9] Wilson, 119; Ayse Tuzlak, "The Magician and the Heretic: The Case of Simon Magus," in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 416-426.
[10] Wilson, 491.

This paper further seeks to build on the proposals of Bart Ehrman and Margaret Mitchell in their monographs, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* and *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*, respectively. In the afterword to his second edition, Ehrman argues that text critics must move beyond attempts to seek out the "original" text because our manuscripts are too distant from any "original" or "autograph." Rather, there is an entire field of research waiting to be done on theological motives and implications of textual corruptions.[11] Mitchell seeks to demonstrate that the Pauline letters "are of interest because of the tension they embody between plain and unplain" interpretation, and thus we should focus not on whether Paul wrote allegorically or plainly, but on how Paul was interpreted and how his writing is employed by later Christians in order to derive significance from his writings for Christianity.[12] Both Ehrman and Mitchell turn away from reconstruction of an original text or person and instead explore processes of reception and adaptation. Although my analysis will use evidence to reconstruct the historical Polycarp, I will not try to explain this figure more precisely than I can, as Ehrman and Mitchell advise. Following them, I will also explore later accounts of Polycarp as manifestations of oral and literary traditions, reconstructing the motives, implications, and significance of the different images of Polycarp that Christians often employed to construct orthodoxy or to educate a congregation rather than to provide historical accuracy.

Reconstructing the Historical Polycarp

A historical reconstruction of Polycarp begins with the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, which he wrote on his journey as a captive on his way to Rome for execution. Several scholars have

[11] Bart Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 331-352.
[12] Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul, The Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 111-115, quotation on 113.

variously attempted to discredit the authenticity of these documents, but the consensus of the majority is that the middle recension of the letters, the seven that Eusebius discusses in the *Ecclesiastical History* (EH), are authentic and that Ignatius wrote them sometime during the reign of Trajan.[13]

Polycarp's name first appears in Ignatius' *Letter to the Ephesians*, written from Smyrna after Ignatius had stayed in Ephesus during his journey in captivity. Ignatius gives a passing remark in the closing of his letter, saying that he is "giving thanks to the Lord, loving Polycarp as I also love you."[14] Polycarp simply receives a special mention here, but in the *Letter to the Magnesians*, Ignatius gives a couple pieces of vital information. Writing from Smyrna, Ignatius tells the Magnesians, whom he previously visited on his journey, that representatives of the Christians in Ephesus, "together with Polycarp, the bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) of the Smyrnaeans, gave me rest entirely."[15] Here Ignatius singles out Polycarp among those giving him rest in Smyrna, and he clearly calls him "ἐπίσκοπος." With this title Ignatius refers to what he considers the highest office of an individual church: he places the ἐπίσκοπος at the top of the hierarchy of offices mentioned elsewhere in his letters. For example, earlier in the same letter, Ignatius differentiates between the Ephesian διάκονος, who is "placed under (ὑποτάσσομαι) the ἐπίσκοπος as the grace of God and the πρεσβύτεροι as the law of Jesus Christ."[16] Polycarp, as the bishop of Smyrna, thus held the highest office in the church of that city in Ignatius's view, and he played a major role in giving Ignatius respite during his captivity while passing through Smyrna.

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[13] Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *Letters of Ignatius*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library 24 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 211; J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: S. Ignatius and S. Polycarp*, pt. II, vol. I (London: MacMillan and Co., 1889), 328-430.
[14] *Ephesians*, 21.1. All citations of Ignatius' epistles, Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians*, and the MartPol come from the Greek in Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1. All translations of ancient texts are mine unless otherwise indicated.
[15] *Magnesians*, 15.
[16] *Magnesians*, 2.

After Ignatius left Smyrna, he at some point wrote a letter to the Smyrnaean church collectively, and another to Polycarp individually. In his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, he does not greet Polycarp by name, but calls him "the ἐπίσκοπος who is worthy of God (ἀξιόθεος)," and he continues to make hierarchical distinctions between the ἐπισκόπος, πρεσβύτεροι, and διάκονοι.[17] In his *Letter to Polycarp*, Ignatius gives the bishop much praise, saying that he has "judgement in God (τὴν ἐν θεῷ γνώμην)" and "a blameless (ἀμώμος) face," and that he is "most blessed by God."[18] Ignatius instructs the Smyrnaeans to obey the ἐπίσκοπος, exhorting them to "follow (ἀκολουθέω) the ἐπισκόπος as Jesus Christ follows the Father."[19] Ignatius would not have them perform any church ritual or even congregate without Polycarp's approval, for "the one who honors (τιμάω) the ἐπίσκοπος is honored by God; the one who does anything unknown to the bishop serves the devil."[20] If the Smyrnaeans followed Ignatius' exhortations, Polycarp would have essentially held the same authority as the word of God, for the congregation was supposed to have the same respect for him as for God.

It is difficult, however, to determine if Polycarp actually held this power. In *Smyrnaeans*, it is only after a lengthy refutation of deviant doctrines that Ignatius tells them to "follow the ἐπίσκοπος as Jesus Christ follows the father" and lists the rituals which must be done with episcopal approval.[21] Ignatius then states "Finally, it is reasonable for us to come to our sense, since we yet have time to repent to God. It is good to know God and the ἐπίσκοπος."[22] In his *Letter to Polycarp*, Ignatius consistently urges Polycarp to "ask for more understanding than you have" and to "be more eager than you are," and he gives him advice on how to take care of the Smyrnaean

[17] *Smyrnaeans*, 8.1, 12.2.
[18] *Polycarp*, 1.1, 7.2.
[19] *Smyrnaeans*, 8.1.
[20] *Smyrnaeans*, 9.1.
[21] *Smyrnaeans*, 2-8.
[22] *Smyrnaeans*, 9.1.

congregation.[23] He tells Polycarp to "make more obedient in your gentleness those who are infectious (μᾶλλον τοὺς λοιμοτέρους ἐν πραότητι ὑπότασσε)."[24] In his address both to the Smyrnaean congregation and to Polycarp, Ignatius thus gives extensive advice on how to obey the bishop as the highest authority in the church and on how to act as the highest authority in the church. Coupled with the lengthy discussions on deviant beliefs and rituals, these exhortations suggest that there may not have been a strong monarchical episcopacy in Smyrna. Therefore, while Polycarp was certainly the bishop, we cannot state with certainty how much authority he actually possessed over his congregation.

Finally, Ignatius asks Polycarp to "lead a council" and "elect someone" to go to Syria and congratulate Ignatius' church in Antioch for finally "coming to peace."[25] He also asks Polycarp to write to "the churches ahead (ταῖς ἔμροσθεν ἐκκλησίαις)," [26] requesting that they also send letters or travel to Antioch to congratulate the church.[27] Thus, from the letters of Ignatius, we learn that the historical Polycarp was the bishop of the church at Smyrna, holding the highest office above the πρεσβύτεροι and διάκονοι, and that he and his church gave Ignatius respite in Smyrna. The amount of authority he actually possessed, however, is unclear. Finally, Ignatius placed Polycarp in charge of a mission that was of utmost importance; Polycarp was to send letters urging other churches to send congratulations to Antioch for making peace in a situation about which Ignatius had been most worried when he left. This last task provides a segue into the next reliable source for the historical Polycarp, Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* (PolPhil), the only extant text that

[23] *Polycarp*, 1.3, 3.2.
[24] *Polycarp*, 2.1.
[25] *Polycarp*, 7.
[26] ἔμπροσθεν is a difficult word to translate; it could mean the churches ahead of Ignatius, which he had yet to visit, or those behind him, whom he visited previously.
[27] *Polycarp*, 8.1.

Polycarp himself wrote, in which we learn how Polycarp took on this task given to him by Ignatius, along with other aspects of his ministry and historical significance.

Indeed, in his letter, Polycarp confirms his receipt of Ignatius' letter, for he explains that, because Ignatius and the Philippians told him to do so, he will make sure the Philippians' letter of congratulations reaches Syria.[28] Several scholars over the past four hundred years have attempted to deny the authenticity of Polycarp's letter or of parts of it because it validates the existence of the Ignatian epistles, which they believed to be forgeries. It is important to note, however, that these claims were part of the post-Reformation polemic against the monarchical episcopacy, the possible existence of which these letters affirm at a very early date. The majority of current scholars hold that PolPhil is authentic.[29] Likewise, some have questioned whether Polycarp sees himself as bishop of Smyrna because his greeting simply states "Polycarp and the presbyters with him in the church of God sojourning in Philippi."[30] But Polycarp writes that his church "sent the epistles of Ignatius which have been sent to us by him, and others, as many as we have with us," to Philippi; these letter named Polycarp as ἐπίσκοπος and discussed the nascent church hierarchy, and Polycarp seems to have no qualms about sending on this information.[31]

While several attempts have been made to determine the overall purpose and argument of PolPhil, I will not attempt to do so, opting rather to examine individual aspects of the letter in order to discuss what we can discover about the historical Polycarp.[32] The bishop was, first of all, a

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[28] PolPhil, 13.1.
[29] In 1936 P.N. Harrison proposed that the received letter of Polycarp actually combines two originally separate letters, a proposal that scholars debate to this day (P. N. Harrison, *Polycarp's Two Epistles to the Philippians* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1936]). See the Appendix for my position that the PolPhil is one letter.
[30] PolPhil, 1.1.
[31] PolPhil, 13.2; Harrison, 283-284.
[32] For attempts to determine the overall purpose of the PolPhil, see Hartog, 61-147; Kenneth Berding, *Polycarp and Paul: An Analysis of the Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp's Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 24-27, 156-186; Harry O. Meier, "Purity and Danger in Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians: The Sin of Valens in Social Perspective," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, No. 3 (1993);

refuter of "heresy." Polycarp rebukes "everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" as "antichrist," "everyone who does not confess the witness of the cross" as "from the devil," and "everyone who treats the sayings of the Lord for his own desires and professes neither the resurrection nor the judgement" as "the first-born of Satan."[33] Furthermore, he tells the Philippians, "Let us leave behind the folly of many and their false teachings and let us turn to the word which has been handed down to us from the beginning . . ."[34]

This last command becomes interesting when combined with the fact that Polycarp is one of the first Christian writers to quote and allude to texts that would later be included in the New Testament. Berding and Hartog have both thoroughly investigated the New Testament citations in Polycarp's letter. While they come to different conclusions about which texts were referenced, they both agree on probable or certain citations or allusions from Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 Peter, 1 John, Matthew, *1 Clement*, and Jeremiah. In contrast, other than Jeremiah there seem to be few references to Old Testament texts such as Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Sirach, and Tobit, and scholars disagree on the certainty of these references.[35] As Hartog and Dehandschutter suggest, Polycarp appears to be "looking for

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Peter Oakes, "Leadership and Suffering in the Letters of Polycarp and Paul to the Philippians," in *Trajectories through the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew F. Gregory and C. M. Tuckett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[33] PolPhil, 7.1.

[34] PolPhil, 7.2. (διὸ ἀπολιπόντες τὴν ματαιότητα τῶν πολλῶν καὶ τὰς ψευδοδιδασκαλίας ἐπὶ τὸν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἡμῖν παραδοθὲντα λόγον ἐπιστρέψωμεν).

[35] Berding, 194-203; Hartog, 170-197. The very nature of Berding's study tell us about the manner of textual transmission and citation among Christians at this period. Berding has a range of levels of certainty with which he labels each textual reference, from "unlikely" to "possible" to "probable" to various levels of "certainty." He also divides them into categories of "citation," "allusion," and "reminiscence" (31-32). Few references receive a grade of "certain true citation," while "loose citations," allusions, and reminiscences abound. While one may take into account Berding's eagerness to see many scriptural references in the letter (See Michael W. Holmes, "Review of *Polycarp and Paul: An Analysis of their Literary and Theological Relationship in Light of Polycarp's Use of Biblical and Extra-Biblical Literature*, by Paul Hartog," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12, No. 1 (2004)), it does seem that Polycarp is recalling much of his material from memory, or, what is also likely, is that he received it through uncodified oral transmission. Whichever the case, there is little emphasis on exact citation of written texts, a notable discovery when paired with the attestation of Papias, about whom I will speak momentarily, that he "did not suppose that words from books benefited me as much as words from a living and enduring voice" (EH, 3.39). All citations of the EH

a specifically Christian paraenetical tradition" with which to advise the Philippians.[36] Along with Clement and Ignatius, Polycarp was one of the first Christians to "treat the New Testament books as authoritative material."[37] Therefore, although many scholars characterize Polycarp as uninventive and imitative, Polycarp was instrumental in constructing his own historical legacy and the legacy of the "proto-orthodoxy" by being a pioneer in the authoritative trope of "apostolic tradition." In order to combat the "heretics" at Philippi, he appeals to "the word which has been handed down to us from the beginning," namely the texts of the supposed apostolic authors which he references as authorities equal to that of the Jewish Scripture throughout his letter: Paul, Peter, John, Clement, Timothy, and Matthew. Rather than Polycarp citing the material which was considered acceptable to "proto-orthodox" Christians, Polycarp was one of the first to construct a set of authoritative "apostolic" authors for "proto-orthodoxy."[38]

Here I wish to highlight that we cannot reconstruct a special relationship between Polycarp and John from the epistles of Ignatius or from Polycarp's letter itself. These texts provide no evidence that Polycarp was a disciple of John (whichever John) or that he belonged to John's apostolic "line." No mention whatsoever is made of any John in the epistles. Furthermore, Polycarp's citation, allusion, and reminiscence of 1 John in his attack that "everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist; and everyone who does not confess the witness of the cross is from the devil; and everyone who . . . proclaims neither the resurrection nor the judgement is the firstborn of Satan," in no way indicates that he was a disciple of the John whom

come from Kirsopp Lake, ed. and trans., Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 1, Jeffrey Henderson, ed., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).

[36] Dehandschutter, "Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians: An Early Example of 'Reception,'" in *Polycarpiana: Studies on Martyrdom and Persecution in Early Christianity* (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2007), 285.
[37] Hartog, 210.
[38] Hartog, 208-215.

Christian tradition assigned as the author of the Johannine canonical epistles, but rather that he simply cited his letters. Polycarp refers to the Pauline letters, 1 Peter, and 1 Clement much more often, and he is no more a disciple of these men than of John, nor is he in any of their "lines."[39]

We cannot determine any real association between Polycarp and any of these earlier figures, particularly Paul, or their apostolic "lines," although Helmut Koester may be correct to claim that "Polycarp is a church leader in the tradition of Paul, to whom he refers explicitly, and whose tradition he interpreted in a manner closely related to that of the Pastoral Epistles."[40] Indeed, Polycarp does refer to Pauline writings often, as both Hartog and Berding have shown. Berding hypothesizes that the many references to Pauline texts are present because "Polycarp desires to imitate Paul" and that he "makes conscious connections to Paul" because he has been asked by the Philippians to write to them about righteousness "as Paul did."[41] It is unclear, however, whether Polycarp would have written with similar emphasis on Paul if he had been writing to a church that was not founded by Paul or a recipient of one of the undisputed Pauline epistles. Furthermore, "imitation" is not the same thing as being in a line of succession in which teachings are passed down from teacher to disciple. Paul was simply a literary and pastoral model for Polycarp, as he was for Ignatius and others.

Beyond the primary sources for Polycarp, we can find a few reliable, negative historical data (that is, things that are *not* true of the historical Polycarp) in the fragments of Papias preserved in Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* and the EH. In his heresiology, Irenaeus tells us that Papias, another enigmatic Christian figure from the second century, was "a hearer of John and a companion of

[39] Berding, 88-91.
[40] Koester, 135. The articles of Berding and Stuckwisch are also concerned with this topics (above).
[41] Berding, 126-141.

Polycarp."[42] It is possible that Polycarp and Papias would have known of each other, for they both lived during the first half of the second century and both resided in Asia Minor as well-known church leaders. Whether they were necessarily "companions" and agreed on all points cannot be demonstrated because Papias never mentions Polycarp in his extant fragments. Irenaeus's stated companionship between Polycarp and Papias, however, begs the question of whether Polycarp must have known John if Papias "heard" John and also knew Polycarp.

In AH 5.33.3, Irenaeus discusses a quotation from a lost treatise from the "*Presbuteri*, who saw John the disciple of the Lord" and who "remembered that they heard from him in what manner the Lord used to teach and speak concerning those times."[43] Irenaeus further claims that "Papias, a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp and an ancient man, has written and born witness [to this teaching] through writing in the fourth of his books."[44] Irenaeus seems to say that these *presbuteri* and Papias (and by association, Polycarp) saw and heard John the apostle – that is, the John who heard Jesus speak.[45] It is important to recognize, however, that this is what Irenaeus says about Papias; these are not Papias' own words, which would be primary evidence, but rather a secondary interpretation.

Fortunately, a fragment of Papias's lost treatise is extant in the EH that gives more precise information about Papias's – and therefore Polycarp's – relationship to John from which we can derive our own secondary interpretation:

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[42] Quoted in EH, 3.39.1 I use Eusebius' version because it preserves the passage in Greek.
[43] All translations of the AH are made from the Latin text of *Irénée de Lyon, Contre Les Hérésies*, Livres III et V, ed. and trans. Adelin Rousseau et Louis Doutreleau, Sources Chrétinennes 211 and 152 (Paris: Les Editions de Cerf, 1969). This quote is from 5.33.3.
[44] AH, 5.33.4.
[45] It seems that Irenaeus has conflated the *presbuteri* and Papias as belonging to the same group who heard the apostles since he claims that Papias was "a hearer of John," a claim which Papias' excerpts which he provides give no evidence for, as I go on to say.

> And whenever someone who had followed (παρηκολουθήκως) the elders (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι) came, I asked about the words of the πρεσβυτέρων – what Andrew or what Peter said (εἶπεν), or what Philip or what Thomas or James said, or what John or Matthew or some other of the disciples of the Lord said, and the things which both Ariston and the elder (πρεσβύτερος) John, disciples of the Lord, say (λέγουσιν).[46]

From Papias' own statement it becomes clear that he had no direct contact with any of the apostles, disciples, or πρεσβύτεροι that knew Jesus – only with those who had followed them. Furthermore, it is clear that there was more than one early John, for Papias separates the John in the primary group, the words of whom he hears from οἱ πρεσβύτεροι, from the presbyter John (ὁ πρεσβύτερος Ἰωάννες), putting the latter in a relative clause with Ariston. He uses an aorist to describe the former's action (εἶπεν) and a present tense for the latter (λέγουσιν), indicating that the former lived previously, while the latter were currently living. But Papias was not a direct "hearer" of either of these Johns, which means that neither was Polycarp necessarily (if he was, we cannot determine such from this evidence).[47] It is appropriate to definitively sever this possible link between Polycarp and John through Papias in order to be historically precise.[48]

The last piece of information to glean from Irenaeus that may be reliable for the historical Polycarp comes from a letter preserved in the EH. In discussing the controversy over the day on which to celebrate Easter, Eusebius quotes Irenaeus's *Letter to Victor* (the bishop of Rome), which

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[46] EH, 3.39.4.

[47] Eusebius also doubts Papias' association with John the apostle. Noting that Papias mentions two different Johns, Eusebius says that "Papias himself, according to the introduction of his books, indicates that he was in no way a hearer and an eyewitness of the holy apostles, and he teaches that he had received the pieces of his faith from their acquaintances through the words which he says" (EH 3.39.2). Eusebius does, however, say that Papias claims to have been a hearer of the presbyters John and Ariston in his writing, naming them often and talking about their traditions (3.39.6-7). Papias' writing that is provided by Eusebius, however, does not indicate this, since it appears Papias knew neither John directly. Eusebius would have had a motive for linking Papias to the presbyter John; one goal of his EH was to create fluid apostolic succession lists and to link important Christian leaders to apostles or immediate disciples, many of which links he simply fabricated out of sparse information (see Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. Philadelphia Seminar on Christian origins, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971], 45, 55, 63-64, 109, 114-117).

[48] This will also be pertinent when I further discuss Irenaeus' claims that Polycarp was a disciple of John.

Irenaeus wrote after Victor had excommunicated all of the Asian churches for practicing Quartodecimanism. The so-called Quartodecimans celebrated Easter on 14 Nisan, based on the doctrine that Jesus was crucified on 14 Nisan, as the Gospel of John claims (making Jesus himself the paschal sacrifice), rather than on the Sunday (the day on which he rose from the dead) after 15 Nisan (the first day of Unleavened Bread, the day on which the Synoptics claim he was crucified) (cf. Jn 19:14, 31, 42 and Mk 14:12, Mt 26:17, Lk 22:7). Irenaeus, upset about Victor's decision, wrote to Victor that the bishops before them made no rule about the day of Easter, and when they did have conflict about it, they essentially agreed to disagree, and no one was excommunicated. Among Irenaeus' examples of Quartodeciman Asian bishops was Polycarp. Irenaeus writes:

> When Polycarp came to stay in Rome with Anicetus, since they held little against each other concerning any other matters, immediately they made peace, not being fond of strife with one another concerning this point. For neither was Anicetus able to persuade Polycarp not to observe [his practice], inasmuch as he did so with John, the disciple of our Lord, and the rest of the apostles with whom he spent time, nor was Polycarp able to persuade Anicetus to observe [his practice] . . . and with these things being the case, they held communion with each other, and Anicetus yielded the Eucharist in the church to Polycarp, clearly in respect, and they departed from each other with peace . . .[49]

Because this account deals with a major contention among Constantinian-era Christians, it seems that Eusebius would not purposely alter Irenaeus' letter in order to make Polycarp, whom he clearly views as an apostolic figure, a Quartodeciman. Irenaeus, on the other hand, was writing this letter to a Roman bishop, Victor, who likely knew well the affairs of Anicetus, a recent predecessor, and would thus know if Irenaeus were lying to him about Polycarp's Quartodecimanism or his visit to Victor in Rome. Shortly before he quotes Irenaeus' letter, Eusebius also cites Polycrates's *Letter to Victor*, written around the same time, which also places Polycarp among a list of Asian Quartodeciman bishops.[50] Finally, the *Vita Polycarpi* (Vita), written several centuries later,

[49] EH, 5.24.16-17.
[50] EH, 5.24.4-6.

contains an introduction that clearly intends to ameliorate Polycarp of his Quartodeciman tendencies.[51] The historicity of Polycarp's Quartodecimanism was likely one reason why Irenaeus created the connection between Polycarp and John, as I will describe below.

Finally, we know that Polycarp was martyred, the only fact about Polycarp himself that we can take from the MartPol, which I will discuss momentarily. This is the end of the historical Polycarp. He was a Quartodeciman bishop of Smyrna who gave Ignatius respite and wrote a letter to the Philippian church, his only extant work, in which he confirms that he has taken on Ignatius' request to send letters of congratulations to Antioch, refutes heretical Christian doctrines, and demonstrates his leading role in the formation of the idea of apostolic tradition, although the amount of authority he had is uncertain. He once visited bishop Anicetus in Rome to discuss the date for Easter, he may have known of Papias, and he was martyred.

Later Legacies of Polycarp

The remaining ancient works that discuss the bishop – the MartPol, Irenaeus' AH and *Letter to Florinus*, the Harris Fragments, and the Vita – are unreliable sources of data for Polycarp's historical bibliography. That is, they are literary fabrications that use Polycarp as a supporting mouthpiece from the nascent Church in order to impart legends, *praxis*, and orthodoxy. I will discuss each text successively, explaining the manner in which each presents Polycarp, and then the motives and function of this presentation, along with the implications.

[51]Vita, 2. I will discuss the Vita later in this paper and how this introduction is likely a late interpolation.

We do know that Polycarp was a martyr because two early witnesses, the MartPol and Irenaeus, attest to this (probably independently).[52] Polycarp was put to death sometime before 180, the date at which Irenaeus wrote, and probably during the reign of either Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius, after Polycarp's meeting with Anicetus in Rome, which seems to have taken place in the 150s. Further precision is futile because the dates given by Eusebius are notoriously sketchy, and we cannot rely on the MartPol itself because it is unclear whether chapter 21, which contains a calendar date, is original to the document.[53]

The basic fact of the martyrdom is the only historical kernel from this text, as the work of several scholars demonstrates. Candida Moss, for example, has shown that the account at large is unreliable for information about Polycarp himself. She demonstrates that, although the author claims to be an eyewitness to the events, the eyewitness, first-person testimony appears only when there is a miracle in the text or the need for an authoritative voice about Polycarp's relics.[54] Polycarp, furthermore, is an imitator of Christ throughout the entirety of the account, suggesting narrative shaping rather than historical accuracy.[55] Judith Lieu, writing about the presentation of Jews in the MartPol, demonstrates that, rather than providing any accurate evidence of second-century Jews or Christian anti-Semitism, the MartPol gives an image of Jews that serves Christian purposes by using Jews and pagans as stock oppositional characters for intra-Christian polemic. For example, the Jews' complaint in chapter 17 that the Christians might "abandon the crucified one and begin to worship this man" is actually intra-Christian polemic inserted into the mouth of the Jews, "suggesting either late editorial activity or an artificial attempt" to weave the theme into

[52] AH, 3.3.4.
[53] I will return to the topic of the chapter 21 and 22 colophons below.
[54] Candida Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 60-61.
[55] Moss, 63.

the story.[56] Finally, Gary Bisbee claims that the author of the MartPol probably did not use a court record to write it because it largely deviates from *commentarius* form, but, if he did, then he edited it freely.[57] Those scholars who argue for the historical reliability of the MartPol have a more difficult time explaining its reliability than those who attempt to explain its narrative, legendary nature.[58] Essentially, almost nothing in the account is dissimilar to the motives and function of the text as a whole, a factor that does not bode well for its historical reliability regarding Polycarp.

The legendary nature of the account becomes even more apparent when we examine these motives and functions. There are two major goals of the MartPol: to depict Polycarp as an example of the manly, Socratic model of noble death and thus to reinterpret the death of Jesus, and to support non-voluntary martyrdom among the variety of pre-Constantinian modes of martyrdom.

Stephanie Cobb has demonstrated the first of these functions. Examining the text as an example of both *imitatio Christi* and *imitatio Socratis*, Cobb writes that the MartPol functions as "an apology for Jesus' death, specifically, and for Christian beliefs, generally."[59] For instance, at the climax of the story, despite the author's insistence on Polycarp's martyrdom as being "in accordance with the gospel," Polycarp is not crucified, but bound to a stake, bravely telling the executioners that he can endure the fire without being nailed down.[60] This refusal of nails seems to be a deliberate effort to outdo the death of Jesus, a death that pagan readers, such as Celsus,

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[56] Judith M. Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the Word of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark (1996), 64-67; MartPol, 17.2.
[57] Gary A. Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentarii* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988), 130-132.
[58] Sarah Parvis tortuously uses the "natural miracle" theory to explain the potential historical accuracy of MartPol in "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," *The Expository Times* 118, No. 3 (2006), 105-112; see also Matthew Miller, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Social Identity and Exemplars in the Early Church" (M.A. thesis, Cincinnati Christian Seminary, 2008). Miller argues for the authenticity of the MartPol as a letter written shortly after the martyrdom itself as a manifestation of the "master commemorative narrative" of Christ's death to which the Smyrnaean church would have immediately keyed Polycarp's martyrdom.
[59] Stephanie Cobb, "Polycarp's Cup: *Imitatio Socratis* in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*," *Journal of Religious History* 38, No. 2 (June 2014), 240.
[60] MartPol, 1.1, 13.3-14.1.

found to be the unmanly death of a criminal in comparison to Greco-Roman noble death traditions.[61] Additionally, Cobb finds many elements in parallel between the MartPol and the Platonic *Apology* for Socrates. For example, both men are charged with atheism and refuse to flee the authorities.[62] The element of death as a sacrifice for others is present in both texts, and Polycarp speaks of partaking "in the cup of your Christ," a possible reference to the Socratic mode of death.[63] Lastly, Cobb convincingly demonstrates that the three main elements of Polycarp's death in the MartPol (as listed by Michael Holmes) – endurance, benefit to others, and divine will – all appear in Plato's *Apology*.[64] "Jesus' death, as interpreted through the Martyrdom of Polycarp, is no longer . . . fodder for pagan ridicule. Rather, Jesus' death has been transformed into a textbook example of a noble death": the author depicts the martyrdom as "in accordance with the gospel," but inserts Socratic elements.[65]

In addition to Cobb's demonstration of the apologetic function of the MartPol, several scholars have provided evidence for another function of the text, which focuses on the much-debated Quintus episode and the author's unwillingness to "praise those who hand themselves over, since the gospel does not teach in this way."[66] Paul Middleton shows that, other than the MartPol, Clement of Alexandria is the first and only Christian writer in the first three centuries to explicitly and consistently condemn voluntary martyrdom, that is, handing oneself over to the authorities (he

[61] Cobb, 238.
[62] Cobb, 227. In Polycarp's case, he does not want to flee at first, but his disciples compel him to hide in two separate homes; finally Polycarp decides to wait to be arrested rather than flee to a third home.
[63] Cobb, 226-227. Cobb admits that the "cup of your Christ" may also be a reference to John 18, which I find more likely.
[64] Cobb, 231-236.
[65] Cobb, 239. For an argument that the MartPol functions to depict Polycarp as an honorable, manly gymnosophist, see Jan Kozlowski, "Polycarp as a Christian gymnosophist," *Studia Patristica: Papers presented to the . . . International Conference on Patristic Studies*, (2011), 15-22.
[66] MartPol, 4.1.

attempts to isolate Clement by assigning to the MartPol a later date).[67] The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, the *Acts of Cyprian*, the *Martyrs of Vienne and Lyon*, the *Martyrs of Palestine*, the *Acts of Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonice*, and Tertullian all appear to glorify varying degrees of voluntary martyrdom without making any distinction between these martyrs and those who waited to be arrested.[68] Clement, on the other hand, along with the MartPol,[69] praises martyrdom, but denies voluntary martyrs the status of true martyrs, an "innovation in the proto-orthodoxy."[70] According to Middleton, as bishops such as Cyprian began to flee persecution, and as various "non-proto-orthodox" groups began to gain as many or more martyrs as the proto-orthodox communities, martyrs garnered authority for those sects. In response, the proto-orthodox began to "play down the importance of martyrdom" and created the category of voluntary martyrdom as a tool with which to condemn "heretics."[71]

The same can be said for the MartPol. The author condemns the Phrygian Quintus because he "was a man who forced both himself and some who were willing to come forth," but "when he saw the beasts, he became a coward," and he "swore the oath and sacrificed."[72] The author tells his audience that these voluntary martyrs are not worthy of praise because the gospel does not

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[67] Paul Middleton, "Early Christian Voluntary Martyrdom: A Statement for the Defense," *Journal of Theological Studies* 64, No. 2 (Oct. 2003): 562-571. Middleton notes that while the *Acts of Cyprian* does likewise, the position is "undermined" when Cyprian's followers offer themselves voluntarily at the end (565).

[68] Middleton, 565-569. For an argument on the lack of a single martyrdom theology in antiquity, see Candida Moss, "Polycarphilia: The Martyrdom of Polycarp and the Origins and Spread of Martyrdom," in *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 401-417.

[69] Middleton holds to the later date for the MartPol as suggested by Candida Moss, and he mentions the possible late interpolation of the Quintus episode, hoping to place Clement on an "island of criticism" by himself (571), heightening his case for the many different perspectives of martyrdom at this time. Despite his position, and regardless of the date of the MartPol, his thesis for anti-volunteerism as a mode of asserting orthodoxy still applies functionally to our text.

[70] Middleton, 563 and 71-72.

[71] For arguments similar to that of Middleton, see Frederick W. Weidmann, "'Rushing Judgement'? Willfulness and Martyrdom in Early Christianity," Union Seminary Quarterly Review 53 (1999), 61-69; and G.W. Bowersock, Martyrdom and Rome (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 59-74.

[72] MartPol, 4.1

teach them to do this.[73] The author denies that voluntary martyrs were true martyrs, in comparison to the model orthodox martyr, Polycarp. Although Polycarp "wanted to remain in the city" when he heard about the martyrdoms, he was persuaded to go away to hide in a country house, and when he is nearly tracked down, he moves to another house.[74] Finally, when the police were on their way to the second home, although Polycarp "was able to go away from there to another country house . . . he did not want to, saying, "Let the will of God be done."[75] It is curious that Polycarp twice wished to remain in the place where he knows that he will be captured – perhaps bordering on voluntary martyrdom for the author, who proceeds to create the contrast between the volunteering Quintus and Polycarp, who waits patiently to be arrested, and even flees. Thus, the overarching motives of the text provide more convincing evidence for the unreliable nature of the MartPol, except for the historical core that Polycarp was martyred.

The last place one might look for any reliable evidence for the historical Polycarp in this document is to the much-disputed chapters 21 and 22, usually considered to be additions to the text by later scribes and editors. I will not attempt to determine whether these chapters are original to the text, for I am not concerned with the date of the martyrdom itself, or of the text, or with the textual transmission, but with the legacies of Polycarp that the texts create.[76]

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[73] MartPol, 4.1.
[74] MartPol, 5-6.
[75] MartPol, 5.1-7.1.
[76] For an argument for the originality of these two chapters, see Candida Moss, "On the Date of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the Martyrdom of Polycarp in Christian History," *Early Christianity* 1, No. 4 (2010), 550-551 and 568-570. It should be noted that the originality of these chapters serves her thesis that the text was written in the third century. For an argument for later addition, see W. Telfer, "The Date of the Martyrdom of Polycarp," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 3, No. 1 (April 1952), 79-83.

Whether or not the two appendices are original, chapter 21 dates the martyrdom to around 154-156, during the high priesthood of Philip of Tralles and the consulship of Statius Quadratus.[77] As Frend's article demonstrates, this leads scholars to speculate about dates for Polycarp's martyrdom that would have allowed him to have known John the apostle in his youth, often using the eighty-six years given by Polycarp for an age or for time from his baptism. The MartPol does not, however, bear evidence of Polycarp's acquaintance with any John, nor does it exhibit any significant textual influence from Johannine literature. Although the argument from silence is never a good one, the silence, combined with the reliable sources for the historical Polycarp, suggests the author's ignorance of any historical connection or any tradition regarding a link between John and Polycarp. He refers to Polycarp as "an apostolic and prophetic teacher . . . a bishop of the church in Smyrna", but nowhere does he mention any specific apostolic lineage.[78] If chapter 21 is a later addition, it would seem that, because Polycarp says "for eighty-six years I have served [Christ]," the interpolator purposely assigned a date around 155 for his martyrdom -- just enough time, counting back eighty-six years to 69 C.E., for Polycarp to have been a disciple of John the apostle, who was said to have lived a rather long time, even until the time of Trajan.[79] While I admit that this is speculation, it seems that the implication of the dating of the MartPol in chapter 21, whether or not it was original to the composition, is that it gave further support to the belief that Polycarp was a disciple of John.

Despite the unreliable nature of the MartPol regarding the historical Polycarp, the legacy of Polycarp found in the MartPol gives historical information concerning Christian attitudes from the

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[77] Frend and Timothy Barnes have pointed out that the two rulers probably did not overlap, and that this mistake is evidence for chapter 21 being a later addition (501-502). For Frend, see above; for Timothy Barnes, see "A Note on Polycarp," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 18, No, 2 (Oct. 1967), 433-437.
[78] MartPol, 16.2.
[79] AH, 2.22.5. Note that Eusebius dates the martyrdom to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (EH 4.14.10-4.15.1). It is virtually impossible to determine which account is accurate and why.

time and community in which it was written. In this text, the author sought to portray Polycarp as an apostolic and prophetic bishop who died as noble martyr in the Socratic tradition, awaiting his death as opposed to those heretics who sought out martyrdom voluntarily. This historico-legendary tradition of his martyrdom was perpetuated throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages up to the present day. The dating of the martyrdom, however, whether original or interpolated, provided fodder for legacies of Polycarp that claimed he was a disciple of John, despite the lack of this connection in the MartPol.

This legacy of Polycarp as a disciple of John distinctly began with Irenaeus, who wrote his *Adversus Haereses* around 180.[80] Irenaeus mentions Polycarp in two places in this treatise (once in detail), and he also mentions the bishop in his *Letter to Victor* and *Letter to Florinus*, preserved by Eusebius in the EH.[81] That Irenaeus seeks to demonstrate a connection between Polycarp and John is clear. An inspection of these passages, however, will show that the actual, historical connection is not at all clear and that Irenaeus had motives for creating this connection. Eusebius, Tertullian, Jerome, and others who read Irenaeus's accounts later adopted the link that Irenaeus created. It is likely that the historical Polycarp's Quartodeciman practice suggested to Irenaeus this connection with John the apostle, whom Irenaeus claims authored the fourth gospel (AH 3.11), which was the source of the Quartodeciman Easter dating.

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[80] Frederick Weidmann notes that, based on Irenaeus' *Letter to Florinus* and on the accounts of Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian about John the apostle "ordaining bishops," "it is possible that "local reminiscences of Polycarp's association with the apostle John predates Irenaeus," and that "the raw material needed for a narrative about John and Polycarp may have been in place before Irenaeus" (132). While Weidmann correctly opens up this possibility, the evidence for earlier accounts of John "ordaining bishops" in no way proves a pre-Irenaean connection with Polycarp. My argument rests on the only evidence we have – that Irenaeus was the first person to create this connection. This assumption is in no way unreasonable since Irenaeus has much motivation for creating the connection, as I explain below. See Frederick W. Weidmann, *Polycarp and John: The Harris Fragments and their Challenge to the Literary Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1999).

[81] Irenaeus' *Letter to Victor*, which I have discussed as giving reliable historical information about Polycarp, will not be discussed again here.

AH 3.3.4 in no way explicitly connects Polycarp and John, but rather gives information that purposefully insinuates such a connection. Irenaeus states that Polycarp "not only was instructed (*edoctus*) by the apostles and conversed (*conversatus*) with many of those who saw (*viderunt*) our Lord, but also was established (*constitutus*) as bishop by the apostles in Asia, in the Smyrnaean church."[82] He says that "all the churches that are in Asia bear witness" to what he says.[83] The text never explains who these apostles are or which Asian churches testify to his account, much in the style of Eusebius, who claims that he has much evidence and testimony to his information, but really just uses these stock phrases to give a semblance of evidence.[84] Most interestingly, Irenaeus gives an (apocryphal) account which he claims to have heard from Polycarp about John:

> There are also those who heard him say that (*sunt qui audierunt eum quoniam*) John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe in Ephesus, when he had seen Cerinthus within, started out of the bath without bathing, saying that he was afraid that the bath would collapse, since Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within.[85]

By claiming that Polycarp spoke with and learned from the apostles and citing a story from Polycarp *about* John – note that the text does not explicitly say that he heard it *from* John – Irenaeus lays the groundwork for the reader to believe that Polycarp was a disciple of John, a connection which Irenaeus likely based on their shared Quartodeciman practice.

Irenaeus' motive is, however, obvious upon a thorough analysis: he wanted to create a firm line of apostolic succession for himself, as opposed to the supposedly non-apostolic "heretics" whom he denounces throughout his treatise. Directly after his statements about Polycarp being instructed by apostles, Irenaeus claims that he "saw [Polycarp] in [his] early youth," when Polycarp was very

[82] AH, 3.3.4.
[83] AH, 3.3.4.
[84] See Bauer, 149-158.
[85] AH, 3.3.4.

old, thus making a direct connection from himself to Polycarp to John to Jesus.[86] The bishop was "of much greater authority and a more trustworthy witness of the truth than Valentinus and Marcion and the rest of those who are of a perverse opinion," Irenaeus says, necessarily providing evidence for his authority to write a treatise about why his Christianity is superior to that of the "heretics."[87] Just as John refuted Cerinthus to his face, so Polycarp refuted Marcion by calling him "the first-born of Satan," placing Irenaeus in a genealogical line of heresiologists.[88] All of this "evidence" functions to help Irenaeus achieve his primary goal: to claim that Polycarp's teachings, and thus his own teachings, because they came from the apostles, "alone are true," and that Irenaeus has the right to say so.[89]

In his *Letter to Florinus*, Irenaeus makes his and Polycarp's apostolic lineage even more explicit, furthering the implication that Polycarp was believed to be a disciple of John and Irenaeus of Polycarp. He claims that both Florinus and he were with Polycarp (in some capacity) in their youth.[90] Here, he claims that he recalls Polycarp's "intercourse with John (τὴν μετὰ Ἰωάννου συναναστροφὴν)" and "that with the rest of those who saw the Lord," again solidifying his own apostolic lineage.[91] As Alan Culpepper notes, it seems that Irenaeus' contact with Polycarp must be historical if he wrote about it in a letter to a friend whom he knew from youth, for the friend could easily confirm or deny the validity of his story.[92] I argue, however, that this tells us virtually nothing about the historical Polycarp. Although the claim that Polycarp interacted with John and

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[86] EH, 4.14.4.
[87] AH, 3.3.4.
[88] EH, 4.14.7. For an excellent analysis of these apocryphal refutations of Cerinthus and Marcion by John and Polycarp, respectively, see Hartog, 89-94. He argues that both of these apocryphal accounts were just "a small step away" from the supposed anti-Marcionite material in both the Johannine epistles and Philippians, leading to legends of personal encounter with heretics (94).
[89] AH, 3.3.4.
[90] EH, 5.20.4.
[91] EH, 5.20.6.
[92] 126.

the other apostles is more definitive here, we know that the link had a highly motivated function and that it may have even been a misreading of Papias or a faulty connection based on the Quartodecimanism of Polycarp and author of the Gospel of John, whom Irenaeus says was John the apostle. The only possible detail to add to Polycarp's biography, a detail which could not be expanded on, is that Polycarp instructed or knew Irenaeus and Florinus in their youth in some capacity. I believe that even this detail, despite Irenaeus' appeal to Florinus, should be called into question based on the rhetoric of the letter.

Again, the purpose of the letter is to refute "heresy" as inferior to apostolic catholic Christianity. Eusebius, who records this letter, explains that Florinus "was being seduced by the deceit of Valentinus" and that Irenaeus wrote his letter to draw him back to apostolic teaching.[93] "The teachings" to which Florinus was succumbing were not given by the apostles, and "not even the heretics outside of the church have ever dared to propound" them, claims Irenaeus.[94] On the other hand, everything that Polycarp told them was "in harmony with the Scriptures."[95] In addition to Irenaeus' obvious need to claim apostolic succession, the rhetoric of the excerpt reveals an over-the-top appeal to his contact with Polycarp:

> For I remember the affairs from that time more than events near to me (for what one learns from childhood becomes stronger as life goes on, and it is united as one), so that I am able to say the manner in which the blessed Polycarp sat and discoursed, and his comings and goings, and the character of his life, and the shape of his body, and the discourses which he used to make for the multitude, and his intercourse with John as he reported also that with the rest of those who saw the Lord . . .recalling [these things] not on paper, but in my heart; and I always reflect on them genuinely by the grace of God . . .[96]

[93] EH, 5.20.1.
[94] EH, 5.20.4.
[95] EH, 5.20.6.
[96] EH, 5.20.5-7.

Irenaeus elaborates on why he remembers Polycarp so well even though he was just a boy; he claims that he can recall just about every detail of Polycarp's ministry; and he insists that even though he did not write anything down, he can recall everything perfectly. The account sounds defensive: Irenaeus has no written proof of his words, and he appears to be overcompensating for his fabrication of details. Therefore, while the evidence from Irenaeus certainly leads the reader to doubt any historical connection between John and Polycarp, I would suggest also that Irenaeus fabricated his own association with Polycarp to create a necessary apostolic lineage for himself, just as the connection with John creates an apostolic lineage for Polycarp, with which both men could have the authority to refute "heretics."

The effect of this account from Irenaeus did, however, have long-lasting implications. Irenaeus laid the groundwork for the legacy of Polycarp as a disciple of John, a detail that does not appear in any of the reliable sources for the historical Polycarp. By claiming Polycarp's apostolic lineage and suggesting that Polycarp heard stories about or from John (the means of transmission vary from direct to indirect), Irenaeus leads readers to believe that Polycarp was a disciple of John. Thus, just as Eusebius takes this connection for granted as mentioned above, so Tertullian claims, "In this way the apostolic churches gave their own accounts; just as the church of the Smyrnaeans reports that Polycarp was appointed by John, so it is that Clement of the Romans was ordained by Peter."[97] Likewise, Jerome in his *De viris illustribus* calls Polycarp "a disciple of John the apostle, and ordained by him bishop of Smyrna."[98] This legacy solidified and was eventually taken for granted in the growing trend of apostolic lineages. Perhaps the most interesting example of the

[97] *De praescriptione hereticorum*, 32.2. Translation from Latin text in *Traité de la prescriptione contre les hérétiques*, ed. and trans. R. F. Refoulé and P. de Labriolle, Sources Chrétiennes 46, (Paris: Édition du Cerf: 1957).
[98] *De viris illustribus*, 17. Translation provided by *Saint Jerome: On Illustrious Men*. Ed. and trans. Thomas P. Halton. The Fathers of the Church 100. (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 35.

proliferation of this legacy that Irenaeus initiated appears in the Harris Fragments, an obscure set of Coptic papyri fragments dating to between the third and sixth centuries.[99]

The Harris Fragments (FrgPol) consist of three fragmentary papyrus leaves, located in the British Library, that provide a legendary account, written in Sahidic Coptic, of Polycarp and his association with John. While the provenance of the original text is unknown, it was present in some capacity in a Theban monastery around 600, and thus the account was known at least in parts of Egypt by this time.[100] Just as this provides a *terminus ante quem* for the text, so Irenaeus' association of Polycarp with John provides the *terminus post quem*.

I unquestionably label the FgrPol as "legendary" because of the obvious nature of the anonymous author's sources. The author's sources for this work were Irenaeus and the MartPol, both of which I have already shown to be so laced with ulterior motives and lacking derivation from our reliable sources as to completely doubt the credibility of their data for the historical Polycarp. That the MartPol was a source for the author is clear from the mention of a Herod who "o[r]dered that he [Polycarp] be brought to him i[n] order that he might kill him" (cf. MartPol 6.2, 8.2),[101] and the accusation that Polycarp, "the teac[her of the] Christian[s]," teaches "them neither to give tribu[te---n]or to worshi[p the] god[s] of the emperor" (cf. MartPol 12.2).[102] Furthermore, there are a series of removals of Polycarp from danger to country houses by his followers (cf. MartPol 5.1, 6.1),[103] and Polycarp has a dream which leads him to prophesy that "It is necessary

[99] Frederick W. Weidmann, *Polycarp and John: The Harris Fragments and their Challenge to the Literary Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1999), 147.
[100] Weidmann, 9-10.
[101] All subsequent citations of the Harris Fragments come from the English translation by Weidmann on pages 42-48 of his book, which are organized by British Library catalog number for each fragment and line number. This citation comes from 64v+56r, line 12-15.
[102] 64v+56r, line 5-12.
[103] 64v+56r, line 16-24.

that I be burned alive" (cf. MartPol 5.2).[104] That Irenaeus was a source for the author is obvious from the association between John the apostle and Polycarp, which is a primary theme of the text and which will become apparent in my discussion of the text's function.

The FrgPol, representing a climax of the legacy of Polycarp as a disciple of John, has many motives and functions, all of which cannot be explained here. It should be analyzed as a text in and of itself, a task for which Weidmann has laid firm groundwork, rather than used as a supporting point in discovering Polycarp's historical biography. With the help of Weidmann, I will attempt to do it some justice by discussing three of its functions, which are apologetic and authoritative in nature.[105]

First, the text functions apologetically for Polycarp's being persuaded to escape to two different hiding spots in the MartPol (6.1, 5.1). As we have seen, there were varying perspectives among early Christians on what constituted the correct manner of martyrdom, and the FrgPol supports a different perspective than the MartPol. In fact, the author was apparently embarrassed that Polycarp went into hiding to escape arrest twice in the MartPol, for in the FrgPol, although his followers are moving him around, Polycarp has no idea why. Polycarp asks them "Why are you going around with me from place to place?"[106] His followers begin to cry because "they had heard him say many times" that he must die in court by fire, and Polycarp makes them "swear that they

[104] 55r, line 3-6.
[105] One function which will not be discussed here is possible support for non-infant baptism. The FrgPol says that Polycarp was 104 years old when he was martyred (64r+56v, line 10). Because the author knew the MartPol, he may have been aware that some people believed Polycarp's 86 years of service to God meant from his baptism at infancy and that, by making his hero 104, the 86 years would have been from his baptism as a teenager (MartPol 9.3). However, this idea is fraught with assumptions. It assumes that the author was actually concerned about discrepancies concerning the age of baptism like modern scholars are; it assumes that the 104 years does not just come from a different tradition; and it assumes that at least some people believed the 86 years in the MartPol to count from baptism at birth, a fact that modern scholars cannot even confirm. Another function not discussed is similar to Cobb's thesis of *imitatio Socratis* alongside *imitatio Christi* for the FrgPol (see Weidmann, 118-119).
[106] 55v, line 5-7.

would tell him the reason" why they were crying.[107] When he prophesies from his dream that he must be burned alive, he "marvel[s] that they have not sought after [him] as of today."[108] Weidmann notes well that, while in the MartPol "Polycarp is consistently the subject of the verb" in the action of moving from house to house, in the FrgPol "Polycarp, as the object of the verb, is consistently acted upon."[109] By making Polycarp a passive instead of active participant in his escapes, and by making him "not privy to the information about his imminent capture," the author defends his two escapes from arrest in the MartPol, which were potentially embarrassing points because the author and others would have seen escape in the face of martyrdom as cowardly.

A more central function of the text is to connect Polycarp to John by claiming that Polycarp's martyrdom substituted for the martyrdom that John did not suffer as an apostle. After discussing the dispersion of the apostles throughout the world, the text notes, in a highly fragmentary section, "of virg[inity ---] to him instead [of ---] or the sword, and the [---]s and the tortures of the [lawcou]rts."[110] Because the *Acts of John* and other Johannine texts preserve the primary tradition of John's virginity and his peaceful death, it is surely John whom this fragment mentions as being a virgin rather than being martyred.[111] But the rest of the apostles all suffered martyrdom as Jesus predicted in Mark 10:39 (par. Mt 20:23).[112] Therefore, this text explains why John was not martyred, for Polycarp tells his followers, "It is necessary that I die by the lawcourt, in the manner that the apostle of the Lord told me when he said 'Since the Lord granted me to die on my bed, it is necessary that you die by the lawc[ou]rt, so that an equilibrium might – '" and the text breaks

[107] 55v, line 11-14 and 55r 9-10.
[108] 55r, line 6-8.
[109] Weidmann, 105.
[110] 63r, line 2-6.
[111] Weidmann, 73-75 and 133.
[112] Weidmann, 133-134.

off.[113] The author presents "Polycarp's martyrdom as compensation for John's peaceful death," using as his source material Irenaeus and Polycarp's allusion to sharing in "the cup of your Christ" in MartPol 14.2, which the author apparently took to allude to the request by the sons of Zebedee from Jesus to which Jesus responds that they "will indeed drink my cup" (Mt 20:23, NRSV).[114]

One last function of the text that Weidmann brilliantly suggests is that, by creating an intimate connection between John and Polycarp, and possibly raising Polycarp to a status equal to that of the apostle, the author was attempting to earn prestige and apostolic antiquity for the city of Smyrna, which was constantly in competition with Ephesus, the city with which John is most closely associated. Smyrna and Ephesus were rivals throughout the Roman period and into the Christian era: they competed for wealth and the prestige of antiquity and later for episcopal authority and apostolic antiquity.[115] Examples of this rivalry include two sixth-century inscribed tablets discovered at Ephesus: one sings the praises of John, while the other says of Polycarp, "but he himself would never accept [the heightened glo]ry of the apostle and the disciples."[116] Whether or not this inscription was inspired by the FrgPol or another text that elevates Polycarp in such a way, it demonstrates the rivalry among Christians of claiming antiquity and authority via their apostolic lineages.

The FrgPol certainly did have the motive of elevating Smyrna alongside Ephesus via an association between Polycarp and John in a context of ecclesiastical rivalry. The text begins with the Irenaean account that "there remained [---]ter him a disciple[e---] name was Polycar[p, and] he made him bisho[p over] Smyrna . . ."[117] It says that Polycarp "continued to walk [i]n the canons

[113] 55v, line 13-22.
[114] Weidmann, 137-138.
[115] Weidmann, 141-144
[116] Weidmann, 145.
[117] 63r, lines 6-10.

which he had learned during his youth from John the a[p]ostle . . . And all the Christians who had heard about his way of life used to seek after him to see him, like genuine children seeking after th[ei]r father."[118] Thus, because Polycarp taught and did the same things as John, he was regarded as similar to John in prestige, and so Smyrna should have the same prestige as Ephesus. The text singles out Polycarp as the one who "alo[ne] remained [among the di]sciple[s] of the apos[tles]," giving him a special position as the most prestigious of early second-generation Christians and potentially elevating him to the status of an apostle, especially when we take into account his martyrdom as compensation for the peaceful death of John, in order to establish an "equilibrium."[119] "Equilibrium" suggests the balance of two equals.

The FrgPol is the climax of the late antique legacy of the Johannine Polycarp, a legacy that appears nowhere in our reliable sources, nor in the MartPol, but which appears first in Irenaeus's letters and heresiology, texts thoroughly motivated by claims to apostolic succession. The FrgPol goes beyond Polycarp, the bishop ordained by John, to create Polycarp, surrogate martyr for John and equal to the apostles. As stated, its unreliable sources and its material that is non-dissimilar to any of the text's overarching motives and function make manifest the legendary nature of the FrgPol. The text does, however, present historical information about the tradition surrounding Polycarp, along with its functions, in the late antique community that produced the document.

The ultimate effect of Irenaeus's account may be found in the efforts of modern scholars to date Polycarp's martyrdom or the MartPol within a time range that would allow Polycarp to have known and learned from an aged John the apostle. I argue that scholars should cease from their attempts to date Polycarp's martyrdom or the MartPol to ca. 155-157 or 165-167 simply due to

[118] 64r + 56v, lines 11-21.
[119] 64r + 56v, line 6-7; Weidmann, 51-53.

this association and abandon attempts to flesh out Polycarp's historical biography with a connection to John.[120] Although the MartPol seems to be a well-developed, functional later forgery, some scholars consistently assert these dates for this supposedly eye-witness account because they believe that is when the martyrdom itself took place, dates that they base largely on the plausibility of the John-Polycarp association.[121] Because we now understand this association to have no historical backing, we can abandon these attempts at precise dating for the martyrdom itself and the text. In fact, scholars should abandon attempts at dating the event any more precisely than between 150 and 180 because it is indeterminable based in the two accounts we have from the MartPol and Eusebius. Likewise, they should abandon attempts to date the MartPol any more precisely than from the mid-second to mid-third century, and they should cease from debates about the historical connection to John the apostle.[122] I understand that the date and lineage do matter to those invested in apostolic succession, but there is simply no demonstrably reliable account of the date of Polycarp's death or of his apostolic lineage. It is time to put to rest attempts at precise calendar dates for the martyrdom or the text and to examine their value in studies of martyrdom, Christology, and transmission of oral tradition.

A final source provides another reason to abandon the tradition of Polycarp, disciple of John, for it does not mention it at all. The *Vita Polycarpi* (Vita) names Polycarp's predecessor as a

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[120] Boudewijn Dehandschutter, for example, maintains a 155-156 date for the text (written shortly after the historical event) and even claims that this is evidence for an earlier outbreak of Montanism in Asian Minor than was previously thought (see "The Martyrdom of Polycarp and the Outbreak of Montanism," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses: commentarii de re theologica et canonica* 75, No. 4 (1999), 430-437.

[121] The date is also largely based on the date ca. 155 that is given by the text in chapter 21 via the names of government officials. However, there are too many problems with this part of the text to give it any primacy in authority. It may be a later addition; it fits perfectly with the John-Polycarp association, a sign that it may have been written in by someone who was familiar with this legendary association; finally, it is directly contradicted by Eusebius, and we have no way to determine which author would be more accurate or reliable and why.

[122] See Frend, "A Note on the Chronology of the Martyrdom of Polycarp and the Outbreak of Montanism"; Dehandschutter, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp and the Outbreak of Montanism"; Parvis, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp"; and Telfer, "The Date of the Martyrdom of Polycarp."

certain Buculus, the bishop of Smyrna who made Polycarp a διάκονος, "established him in the presbyterate," and indicated his succession as επίσκοπος by "tak[ing] hold of the hand of Polycarp, and plac[ing] it first upon his breast, and then on his face, showing that however many *charismata* were ministered (διακονεῖται) in these faculties . . . will all have been entrusted to him (ἔσται ἐγχειρισθέντα ἐν αὐτῷ)."[123] It seems that the author of the Vita was unaware of the connection between John and Polycarp, for he does not mention it and the text clearly places Polycarp in a different episcopal line.

Besides Polycarp's episcopal lineage, the Vita has at least three motives and functions: legitimizing episcopal asceticism, episcopal election processes, and visionary experience within the catholic church. Written somewhere between the mid-third century and the end of the fourth, the text represents true hagiography.[124] Thus, a few words on the function of hagiography are necessary. Timothy Barnes explains the trajectory of Christian hagiography, post-Nicaea:

> After persecution ceased, Christian hagiography took one of two different directions. On the one hand, martyrs were replaced by monks, bishops and the holy men and women as the heroes of hagiography, while hagiographers were often more eager to instill explicit moral and theological improvement in their readers than accurately to record the actions of their heroes and heroines. On the other hand, since nothing that was both new and true could any longer be said about martyrs who were receding rapidly into the past, hagiographers who wrote about the age of persecution were compelled to either rewrite or embroider a genuine old text or resort to wholesale invention.[125]

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[123] Vita, 3, 11, 17, 20. All subsequent citations are from the Greek text provided by *The Life of Polycarp: An Anonymous Vita from the Third Century*, ed. and trans. Alistair Stewart Sykes, (Strathfield, NSW: St. Paul's Publications, 2002), 90-144.

[124] Attempts to date the text have produced varied results. For the late third century, see Alistair Stewart-Sykes, "*Vita Polycarpi*: An Ante-Nicene Vita," *Augustinianum 40* (2000), 21-33; for the fourth century, see C. Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu mit seinen Jüngern nach der Auferstehung* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1919), 706-725 and J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: S. Ignatius and S. Polycarp*, pt. II, vol. III (London: MacMillan and Co., 1889), 429-430.

[125] Barnes, 154.

In other words, the focus shifted from martyrdom to ecclesiastical and theological matters, and the truth was stretched and even invented with the early martyrs as mouthpieces.

Many scholars agree that hagiography gives insight into the historical setting of the author, but not of the actors themselves in the texts. Peter Turner argues that the truths the hagiographers sought to demonstrate were higher divine truths as represented by literal events and miracles.[126] The texts often didactically encourage the readers to apply their examples to their own world, and so hagiography provides evidence for the historical worldview and attitudes of the author's community.[127] Similarly, H. J. W. Drijvers writes that hagiography, in like manner to the Greco-Roman *bios* tradition, "do[es] not primarily describe the lives and fates of particular individuals, but put[s] them into a framework of current conceptions of the human person."[128] While we should not attempt to determine the fact and fiction of a hagiographical text, "these lives . . . function as paradigms of ideal manhood and social ordering, a code through which reality is read and understood by the groups in which these lives originate."[129] Thus, the Vita is an epitome of the functional mode of analysis I employ throughout this paper. There is simply nothing we can determine about the historical Polycarp in the Vita – there is no independent attestation for virtually any detail, and most of it is contextually incredible for the second century. We can only determine the function it had and the attitudes and traditions of the late antique Christian community to which it gives witness.

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[126] Peter Turner, *Truthfulness, Realism, Historicity: A Study in Late Antique Spiritual Literature* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), 71-74.
[127] Turner, 74.
[128] H. J. W. Drijvers, "The Saint as Symbol: Conceptions of Person in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity," in *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought*, ed Hans G. Kippenberg, Yme B. Kuiper, and Andy F. Sanders (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1990), 138.
[129] Drijvers, 140.

As stated, the Vita names Buculus as the previous Smyrnaean bishop who ordains Polycarp as his successor. There is no mention of John anywhere throughout the text. That being said, it seems that the Vita provides an independent tradition concerning Polycarp as a successor of Buculus, a tradition that I claim to be independent from that of the Johannine Polycarp, especially when combined with the fact that none of the reliable sources for the historical Polycarp, nor the MartPol, all of which seem to come from Asia Minor, mention any connection with John.[130] I will analyze this geographical phenomenon later. For now, I shall discuss three primary functions of the Vita, namely the use of Polycarp as a mouthpiece to support episcopal asceticism, episcopal election, and visionary experience, in order to explain the development of this non-Johannine Polycarpian legacy.

The Vita attempts to impart upon its reader the correct lifestyle and manner of a Christian bishop. After Buculus' death, the bishops of the surrounding cities gathered to honor him and to select the new bishop.[131] They all listen to Polycarp give the reading on the Sabbath, and "the

[130] One might make an objection to my proposal that this is an independent legacy of Polycarp. The text begins by saying that, when Paul was in Smyrna, he "spoke to them about the Pascha and Pentecost, reminding them about the new covenant of the offering of bread and cup, that it is necessary to celebrate it entirely in the days of unleavened bread . . . " (Ch. 2) The author interjects: " For here the apostle clearly teaches that we should not do it [Pascha] beyond the period of unleavened bread, just as the heretics do, especially the Phrygians, and that we should not do it moreover on the fourteenth day out of necessity; for he said nothing about the fourteenth day, but about the day of unleavened bread, the Pascha, Pentecost, confirming the gospel" (Ch. 2). A counter-argument to my position would be that the author was aware of the John-Polycarp connection because the source which he sought to counter with his anti-Quartodeciman statements, namely Irenaeus, contained this tradition; thus, one might say, the tradition of Polycarp being ordained by Buculus and his lineage originating with Paul is not actually a separate tradition, but just a story fabricated by the author of the Vita at this very moment in time, one which was not widely recognized, in order to counter a connection between Polycarp and the Quartodeciman John. This issue, however, goes away when we consider the conclusions of Alistair Stewart-Sykes on the beginning of the Vita. Stewart-Sykes convincingly argues that the first two chapters and the beginning of the third, up to "There was a certain bishop in Smyrna at that time whose name was Buculus . . ." (Ch. 3), are a mid-fourth century anti-Quartodeciman interpolation. He bases his assertion on the evidence that the introduction is not typical of a *bios* or hagiography, it has no connection to the rest of the text, Quartodeciman practice is not mentioned anywhere else in the text, and there is evidence for *a corpus Polycarpianum* having been put together in late antiquity because of the postscript to the MartPol and this prescript to the Vita (Stewart-Sykes, "*Vita Polycarpi*: An Ante-Nicene Vita," 2000). Once we do away with the anti-Quartodeciman introduction, we are left with a Vita which makes no mention of any John, but rather explicitly presents Polycarp being ordained by Buculus.

[131] Vita, 21.

reading was the letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus, in which he says what sort of man is it necessary for the bishop to be; and he [Polycarp] was so suited to this type, that, as they listened, they said to each other that he would lack none of the things for which Paul deems worthy the one who takes care of the church."[132] That is, the author states here that Polycarp was a good candidate for the episcopacy according to the model given in the Pastoral Epistles, namely a bishop who is "married only once" who "manage[s] his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way . . ." (1 Tim 3: 2-4, NRSV).

Earlier in the Vita, however, Polycarp was a model ascetic. In addition to fulfilling some of the prescriptions found in the Pastorals, such as avoiding "idle talkers" (Ch. 7, cf. 1 Tim 4:7) and acting temperately, the author explicitly states that Polycarp was "not drug down upon the earth by the bond of marriage."[133] In fact, Polycarp is portrayed as glorifying "celibacy and virginity," discussing the values of three different grades of chastity, namely monogamy, widowhood, and total continence.[134] He claims that childcare and domestic affairs just cause worry, suffering, and grief.[135] This view is irreconcilable with the bishops' declaration that Polycarp completely fits the requirements of a bishop found in the Pastorals. Apparently, the community in which the Vita was written was struggling to determine the proper conduct for a bishop, torn between ascetic values and the explicit statements by "Paul" (i.e., the forger of the Pastorals, unknown to the writer of the Vita) that a bishop should be an upstanding *paterfamilias*. Thus, the character of Polycarp functions as a mouthpiece, authorized by his presence in the early church and by his martyrdom,

[132] Vita, 22.
[133] Vita, 9.
[134] Vita, 14-16.
[135] Vita, 9.

to recreate this community's model ἐπίσκοπος as one who still follows many of the characteristics required by "Paul," but who is an ascetic ideal, renouncing sex and marriage.

Polycarp's accession to the episcopacy provides another primary function of the Vita, giving a detailed account of Polycarp's placement onto the episcopal seat. He was selected by all the "bishops from the surrounding cities," some of whom "amazingly saw visions" concerning Polycarp's holiness and fitness for the position.[136] The people, along with the πρεσβύτεροι, unanimously gave their assent to Polycarp.[137] After the bishops, presbyters, deacons, and people selected him, "the deacons then led him to the laying on of hands, which was customary, through the hands of the bishops. And he was seated by them . . ."[138] The author sees this manner of episcopal installation as the orthodox manner because the text states that Polycarp "saw in the spirit the feet of Christ who was present with him standing there for the judgement of the priesthood. For wherever there are ministers, both priests and Levites, in the middle also is the high priest who wears the great robe that falls to the feet."[139] The text authorizes the communal election process, laying on of hands, and seating ceremony, likely performed in the community of the author as the orthodox procedure, with the example of Polycarp and by the approval of Christ himself.

Lastly, the Vita functions to maintain the orthodox nature of visionary and prophetic experience. Throughout the letter, an angel comes to Kallisto " in a vision of the night (ἐν ὁράματι νυκτός)" telling her to go buy Polycarp from two men; God commands Buculus "through a vision (δι᾽ ὁράματος) to make Polycarp a presbyter; Buculus learns who his successor will be "through

[136] Vita, 21.
[137] Vita, 22.
[138] Vita, 22.
[139] Vita, 23.

frequent visions of the Lord (πολλάκις δι᾽ ὁράματος τοῦ Κυρίου)"; the visiting bishops "saw wonders of a vision (ὀπτασίας θαύματα ἔβλεπον); Polycarp has a vision of Christ at his ordination; and Polycarp is warned by an angel of God that an inn in which he was sleeping would soon collapse.[140] Stewart-Sykes suggests that these visionary experiences function polemically against Montanism, "redefin[ing]" . . . prophecy as visionary, and not enthusiastic, through the frequent mention of visions and the absolute absence of any prophecy delivered from a possession trance."[141] This claim finds support in the Vita's statement that "concerning the Holy Spirit, and the gift of the Paraclete, and the rest of the *charismata*, he [Polycarp] showed that there was no receiving them outside of the catholic church, just as no limb cut from the body has any power . . ."[142] Thus, it does seem likely that the author's motive was to assure the reader that visions are acceptable manifestations of the Holy Spirit, but only within the church and not in "heretical" groups, like that of the Montanists or any group outside of the orthodoxy that claimed to have legitimate visionary or prophetic experiences.

Thus, the Vita provides a rather different tradition of Polycarp, maintaining the non-Johannine Polycarp of the reliable sources, but weaving in many new details. Here, Polycarp is ordained by Buculus, is a model ascetic, and is part of an extremely hierarchical and structured church order, containing deacons, presbyters, bishops, election processes, and ordination ceremonies. As a catholic orthodox Christian, furthermore, he and other orthodox Christians can receive legitimate visions from God, while "heretics" cannot. While the three ecclesiastical offices in the Vita may have been taken from Ignatius's and Polycarp's letters, the author has more fully defined and institutionalized them to match his own late antique time period. There is also no explicit reliable

[140] Vita, 3, 18, 20, 21, 23, and 27.
[141] Stewart-Sykes, *The Life of Polycarp,* (2002), 38.
[142] Vita, 13.

evidence for the historical Polycarp's celibacy either in the reliable sources or the MartPol.[143] The visionary experiences do show up in the MartPol and the FrgPol, but not in the reliable sources for Polycarp's biography. The Vita preserves an independent tradition entirely void of Johannine discipleship which presents Polycarp as an ascetic, visionary, entirely orthodox bishop as defined by the community who wrote it.

A survey of the ancient and late antique Christian literature surrounding Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, brings us to several conclusions. One is that there were at least two traditions about Polycarp that arose after his death: the Johannine Polycarp, who had an intimate discipleship with John the apostle and who was even a surrogate martyr for him, as presented by Irenaeus and the Harris Fragments, along with the Polycarp who was ordained by Buculus and who was a model ascetic of a highly developed ecclesiastical order, as presented by the Vita. The major difference between these two traditions is the apostolic lineage of Polycarp, namely the presence of a Johannine connection in one and the absence in the other. This factor indicates that these traditions were independently formed. Not only do the emphases on certain Polycarpian characteristics shift between the separate legacies, but the texts give starkly oppositional accounts as to who Polycarp's predecessor was. If the author of the Vita had been aware the Johannine legacy, he likely would have adopted it to his hagiography in order to boost the ecclesiastical and apostolic prestige of Smyrna, as did the author of the FrgPol. Inserting John's name in place of Buculus' would have created the same account of early ecclesiastical hierarchy, asceticism, and visionary experience (the latter two ideas were a large part of the Johannine legacy). Coupled with the fact that there is

[143] In the PolPhil, Polycarp gives several exhortations to young men and virgins to be sexually continent (5.3), but within the lists of instructions to deacons and presbyters there are no explicit commands of celibacy, only to be self-controlled in everything (ἐγκρατεῖς περὶ πάντα) (5-6). Polycarp does mention that "we should teach . . . also our wives (τὰς γυναῖκας ἡμῶν) to walk in the faith which has been given to them, and in love, and in holiness, loving their husbands in all truth . . . (4.1-2)." The possessive ἡμῶν seems to include Polycarp, but we cannot be certain.

no mention of Johannine lineage in the historical documents and in the MartPol, it is reasonable to argue that the Vita preserves a legacy of Polycarp that is separate and independent from the Irenaeus' Johannine legacy. The Vita and MartPol, while they develop Polycarp's legacy greatly and differently, belong to a similar lineage in that they both preserve the historical lack of a Johannine lineage for Polycarp.

But how did two separate traditions arise? Geography may be the answer. The non-Johannine texts -- Ignatius' letters, the PolPhil, the Papian fragments, the MartPol, and the Vita – all come from Asia Minor.[144] None of these texts mention a John to whom Polycarp is connected, nor any John in general. The texts and authors who do make a connection between John and Polycarp – Irenaeus and the Harris Fragments – are from outside of Asia Minor. This may suggest that the Johannine legacy was unknown in the region where the historical Polycarp lived, but arose in the regions of Gaul via Irenaeus and perpetuated in places outside of Asia Minor, like Egypt, where the Harris Fragments, written in Coptic, once resided. The problem with this theory is that Irenaeus claims to have been in Asia Minor with Polycarp in his youth (although I have already seriously questioned this claim), and Weidmann posits that the FrgPol were originally written in Greek in Smyrna as a way to compete with the apostolic prestige claimed by Ephesus, the city's rival.[145]

While the geographical split is still a possibility, what may be more likely is that Irenaeus, in Gaul, fabricated Johannine lineage for Polycarp due to his own apostolic claims, a lineage unknown to anyone besides himself, and that this legend spread and perpetuated throughout the Empire, even penetrating into Asia Minor (where the historical tradition did not include

[144] All but the Vita most scholars agree come from Asia Minor. The Vita likely was also written in Asia Minor, according to Stewart-Sykes (*The Life of Polycarp*, 2002, 22-23), or at the least a Syrian with connections to Smyrna.
[145] Weidmann, 146-147.

discipleship of John) if the FrgPol were written there, but not reaching everyone, as the Vita demonstrates.[146]

The sheer amount of textual material we possess that does not show any Johannine lineage should demonstrate the non-historicity of the connection. In all but two of the texts or authors which I have discussed, it is absent. One of the texts, the FrgPol, clearly sources this connection from Irenaeus and extrapolates it onto his own agenda. The culprit now stands alone: Irenaeus of Lyon is the sole author who gives primary attestation to the Johannine Polycarp, and I have shown that his account is likely not reliable for this historical Polycarp (except for Polycarp's Quartodecimanism in the *Letter to Victor*) because of its highly motivated nature, along with its lack of independent attestation and dissimilarity.

All of the unreliable texts, in fact, have their own motives and function, and they use Polycarp, an early bishop and martyr, as a mouthpiece to authorize their own orthodox beliefs, practices, and lineages. While Irenaeus used Polycarp as an apostolic link between himself and John the apostle, the MartPol used him to demonstrate the orthodox way of martyrdom and to represent a more manly, Socratic death of Jesus. Whereas the Harris Fragments employed Polycarp as a surrogate martyr for John to apologize for his non-martyrdom, the Vita used his early episcopacy to authorize ecclesiastical hierarchy and clerical asceticism. The accounts became increasingly fantasized because they no longer presented Polycarp simply as a historical figure – he was a mouthpiece.

When we strip away all of this excess hagiography, we are left with the real, historical Polycarp. He was a bishop from Smyrna of unknown lineage who wrote a letter, his only surviving writing, to the Philippian church shortly after Ignatius encountered him on the way to Rome. Although the

[146] If the FrgPol were written later than the Vita, which is a serious possibility, then it is possible that the Johannine tradition simply penetrated Asia Minor later than when the Vita was written.

amount of authority he actually possessed remains unclear, he was in charge of a mission, given to him by Ignatius, to collect letters of congratulations from other churches to be sent to Antioch. He refuted docetic heresies, but was himself a Quartodeciman, a doctrine that would later be condemned as heresy. One of the first Christians to use texts that would later form the New Testament authoritatively alongside Jewish Scripture, he was a pioneer in inventing the concept of "apostolic tradition." He may have known of Papias, and possibly Irenaeus. He was martyred. That is it. The effects of Polycarp's historical life are substantial, especially his authorization of supposedly apostolic texts and his early martyrdom. But for such a vital figure of early second-century Christianity, this is relatively little information. In fact, the scant information leaves readers wanting more, especially information about his ecclesiastical lineage. Thus, it is not surprising that unreliable legends immediately proliferated with Irenaeus and the MartPol, and that these texts had just as much, if not more, impact on readers than the historical data because they answer the questions readers wanted to know, particularly readers who were influenced by the concepts of apostolic succession, martyrdom, and ecclesiology that authors like Irenaeus indicated were the important issues, employing Polycarp as an example.

Although I have attempted to delineate between sources that are reliable and unreliable for the historical Polycarp, between one legacy and another, questions remain. For example, although I have shown that Papias makes distinctions between "elders," "disciples," and those who "followed" the Lord, the nature of these distinctions remains obscure and debated; unlocking the meaning of these titles would do much service to studies of early Christian ecclesiology. The Harris Fragments and the *Vita Polycarpi* deserve more direct scholarly analysis than they have received, especially the visionary and prophetic experiences that abound in both texts. What kind of visions are these? Are they different than Montanist visions and prophecy, or the same? Finally,

I add Polycarp to a list with Jesus, Paul, and Simon Magus. All of these figures are part of a larger phenomenon within Christianity in which multiple legacies for one figure are found in the sources. Sometimes they are independent, and sometimes they are directly and purposefully opposed. As part of a larger phenomenon affected by the struggle for orthodoxy and by geographic barriers, these instances of multiple traditions deserve more attention in relation to narrative, rhetorical, mythological, and folkloric characteristics. For now, I have hopefully cleared up any misconceptions about Polycarp, only to leave us with yet another enigmatic historical figure of early Christianity.

Appendix: How Many Letters from Polycarp to the Philippians?

Several scholars over the past four hundred years have attempted to deny the authenticity of Polycarp's *Letter to the Philippians* based on claims that the letters of Ignatius are forged and that the PolPhil is a forged document written to validate the Ignatian epistles.[147] Others, such Jean Daillé, have argued that chapter 13 of the PolPhil was an interpolation added to give credence to the Ignatian letters, which the interpolator also forged.[148] These arguments were proposed in the post-Reformation era and were largely motivated by the Protestant desire to deny early Christian

[147] See Harrison, 37 where he cites several scholars, including Christian Friederich Rössler, F. C. Baur, Theodor Keim, and several others.
[148] For summary, see Harrison, 32-33.

evidence for the monarchical episcopacy which is suggested in the Ignatian epistles, which in turn is validated by Polycarp's attestation to Ignatius.[149]

Despite Bishop J. B. Lightfoot's monumental work arguing for the authenticity and unity of the letter (which one may argue was influenced by Catholic support for monarchical episcopacy), P.N. Harrison provided the compromise thesis in 1936 that has been largely accepted until recently. Harrison says that no previous scholarship provides an adequate explanation as to why PolPhil 13 uses the present tense to ask for information "regarding Ignatius himself and those who are with him (*de ipso Ignatio et de his qui cum eo sunt*)," while in PolPhil 9 Polycarp seems to believe Ignatius and company are already dead, saying that they "are in the place due to them, with the Lord, with whom they also suffered (συνέπαθον)"; Harrison says that it makes the most sense if they were in fact written at different times.[150] Chapters 13-14, the section with the present tense verb, must have been written as a cover letter to the Ignatian epistles immediately after Ignatius left Philippi and Polycarp received a letter from the Philippians, for Polycarp must have been in a hurry to carry out the task that Ignatius had assigned to him, a divine task that took precedence over everything.[151] Chapters 1-12, the section with the past tense verb, on the other hand, must have been written around the end of the reign of Hadrian because, along with the past tense verb, the heresy described by Polycarp in chapter 7 refers to the nascent teaching of Marcion before he developed his dualism in Rome.[152]

[149] Harrison, 32.
[150] *Philippians* 13.2, 9.2; Harrison 79-106, 148-154.
[151] Harrison, 79-106.
[152] Harrison, 172-205.

The unity and genuineness of the letter has been convincingly supported by several major scholars, however, including Lightfoot, Dehandschutter, Schoedel, Holmes, and Hartog.[153] An argument for the unity of the letter rests on two main points: a refutation of the supposed discrepancy between chapters 9 and 13, and an analysis of Polycarp's discussion of heresy. As Hartog explains, despite the fact that Ignatius may have just recently left and still been on his way to Rome, "for Polycarp not to assume Ignatius' martyrdom would have been to rob Ignatius of his crowning achievement."[154] This could explain Polycarp's use of a past tense verb even though he knew the martyrs may still be alive. Furthermore, Harrison himself suggests a plausible counterargument to his judgement on the present tense of chapter thirteen when he states that one should not interpret *qui cum eo sunt* to mean "those that are with him in glory" or something such as this to make sense of the present.[155] Why should we not? It is notable that in chapter nine, which Harrison believes to have been written later because Polycarp uses an aorist (συνέπαθον) for the experience of the martyrs, Polycarp also uses a present tense, saying that "they are (εἰσὶ) in the place due to them, with the Lord, with whom they suffered (συνέπαθον)." Thus, if we interpret the present tense in chapter 13 to mean that the martyrs are with each other in the presence of the Lord, which is what the present tense refers to in chapter 9, it seems that Polycarp knows that the martyrs are probably dead at this point, although he lacks details, and he says in both chapters that they are presently together with God. This argument, furthermore, is not even necessary if the original Greek, as suggested by John Pearson, was the tenseless τῶν μετ᾽ αὐτοῦ.[156]

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[153] Lightfoot, 328-430; Boudewijn Dehandschutter, 154-157; William R. Schoedel, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. 5, (Camden, NJ: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1967), 4; Michael W. Holmes, trans. and ed. *The Apostolic Fathers in English* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 133 n. 8; Hartog, *Polycarp and the New Testament* . . ., 61-73 and 148-169.
[154] Hartog, 167.
[155] Harrison, 147.
[156] For summary, see Harrison, 35-36.

Furthermore, the heresy described by Polycarp is not that of Marcion, as Paul Hartog has thoroughly explained. Harrison's main evidence for dating chapters 1-9 to around 135 is his assertion that the heresy that Polycarp refutes in this part of the letter must be that of Marcion before he developed the dualism he learned from Cerdo at Rome.[157] Hartog, however, demonstrates that "the only Marcionite doctrine that is explicitly refuted is docetic christology," a christology that was held by many other pre-Marcionite "heretics" (see the Johannine epistles, for example); the other doctrines Polycarp refutes are not those of Marcion and cannot be shown to have belonged to Marcion before he went to Rome, but rather belonged to any number of Christian groups around the time of Trajan.[158]

Thus, no evidence incontrovertibly supports the two-letter hypothesis or interpolation theories, solutions which should be employed only as a last resort. The crux of the matter resides in the present tense *sunt* of chapter 13, and I have given a reasonable explanation to reconcile it with the rest of the letter. We therefore have one extant letter from Polycarp, which he wrote to the Philippians sometime around the end of the reign of Trajan, shortly after Ignatius had left Philippi to be executed in Rome.[159]

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[157] Harrison, 172-205.
[158] Hartog, 95-105.
[159] I will not attempt to argue for more precise dating than this. Attempts by scholars such as Harrison to determine how long it was after Ignatius left Philippi that Polycarp wrote the letter, working on the level of weeks, are futile. We cannot pretend to know the calendar date of a few undated letters written two-thousand years ago based on evidence such as Polycarp's "urgency" and his ability to quote texts that would later become part of the New Testament.

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